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Developing a Researcher Identity: Commonplace Books as Arts-Informed Reflective Process

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Abstract

This article shares the processes of five emerging researchers as they trace their journeys in becoming researchers and examine their identities through the qualitative, arts-informed method of “commonplace book” creation. It positions commonplace books as “living document” that explore the ongoing processes of identity development we experience as novice scholars in the field of education. Using this article, we extend our artistic processes, inviting readers to join the conversation and reflect on why and how they engage in academic work, as well as the potential this method has for reflection, meaning-making and dissemination. We highlight the use of commonplace books as an arts-informed reflective method and a valuable performance in the journey of becoming/being academic researchers.

Keywords

Researcher Identity, Doctoral Journey, Arts-Informed Reflective Methods, Commonplace Books

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Developing a Researcher Identity: Commonplace Books as Arts-Informed Reflective Process

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This article shares the processes of five emerging researchers as they trace their journeys in becoming researchers and examine their identities through the qualitative, arts-informed method of “commonplace book” creation. It positions commonplace books as “living document” that explore the ongoing processes of identity development we experience as novice scholars in the field of education. Using this article, we extend our artistic processes, inviting readers to join the conversation and reflect on why and how they engage in academic work, as well as the potential this method has for reflection, meaning-making and dissemination. We highlight the use of commonplace books as an arts-informed reflective method and a valuable performance in the journey of becoming/being academic researchers. Keywords: Researcher Identity, Doctoral Journey, Arts-Informed Reflective Methods, Commonplace Books

As doctoral students navigate the complex world of academe, they hone their research skills and begin to negotiate and reconceptualize their identities (Hall & Burns, 2009). In addition to acquiring new research skills (Mantai, 2017), engagement in the doctoral journey also has potential to transform the individual (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). This article describes a moment in our collective and individual academic journeys where we used an arts-informed approach to stop and reflect on our evolving identities as emerging scholars. Each author is pursuing a PhD in Education at McGill University, in Montreal, Canada. While we share this pursuit, each of our journeys, research interests, and academic goals are different. Through this article, we examine these differences, and discuss how our identities as researchers can be explored through the creation of commonplace books.

Background

In fall 2016, we took part in a doctoral colloquium, led by Dr. Lynn Butler-Kisber. For several of us, this colloquium was the last of our required courses. In this course, we were encouraged to record our developing sense of researcher identity through memo-writing, later using the memos to craft commonplace books. The questions that guided our process were: Who am I as a researcher? And, what brought me to where I am today? Creating the commonplace books was an arts-informed approach at understanding our academic identity formation in relation to stories and significant events in our lives.

At this stage of our journey into doctoral studies, we were grappling with how to articulate our nascent researcher identities and the pivotal moments that shaped our desire to pursue research. We are all researchers in education, yet we were exploring myriad aspects of the field, and each of our researcher identities was, unsurprisingly, unique. Our commonplace books – from format to content – reflect those different interests and identities. Exhibiting the roots of our passions for inquiry, and exploring our individual spheres of research interest, these books bear witness to our individual stories, tracing each of our doctoral journeys from their earliest inception, and integrating various modalities, including narrative, photographs, drawings, poetry, and visual forms of documentation.

At the end of our colloquium, we came together to share our books, our experiences, and epiphanies that emerged from the process. Although some of us initially approached this task with trepidation, we found this process of examining, creating, and sharing exceptionally useful as a method of reflection and self-discovery.

What are Commonplace Books?

The term “commonplace book” may be misleading. The books we describe are not *commonplace*, that is, mundane; rather, the books are meant to serve as a common *place* in which we can gather our intellectual gems – the thoughts, feelings, inspirations, and musings to which we intend to return. Blair (1992) describes commonplace book creation as a versatile method of reading in which individuals collect passages, arguments, and information of interest in a personal book so that they could be “kept handy” for later use. Returning to this common place is meditative, reflective, and generative.

Commonplace books have a long and storied history and have been used for a variety of purposes throughout time. Made popular during the Renaissance, they continued to gain favour well into contemporary times emanating from the influx of book publishing:

Throughout the early modern period commonplace books provided repositories for arranging notes, excerpts, drawings, and objects. Regarded as aids to memory and storehouses of knowledge, they were part of a pedagogic tradition related to rhetoric and the art of memory that dated back to the classical period. Reducing vast amounts of knowledge to a manageable form, they instantiated a special relationship between the accumulation of knowledge and the organization of space. (Dacome, 2004, pp. 603-604)

Commonplace books are ways of compiling knowledge and can be akin to scrapbooks including a variety of elements such as photographs, notes, quotations, *pensées* and other visual and written forms of documentation, and interspersed with suppositions, incidents, memories springing *from* the entries themselves (Smither, 2011). Like the process of reflective memo-writing, these books can be used by readers, writers, students, and scholars as a means of remembering and responding to notions and ideas that are of interest and which embody the reflective process. Each commonplace book is unique: mirroring the reflections, thoughts and ideas of the author through the careful selection of significant pieces placed in each book.

Commonplace Book Creation as Reflective Method

In this article, we consider the commonplace books as an arts-informed method through the creation of multi-media artifacts that portray aspects of our past, present and future positions as researchers. Rather than ascertaining certainty, through our artistic inquiry processes, we seek an “enhancement of perspectives” and a new way of seeing the world (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

As human beings, we possess the ability to interpret our thoughts, feelings and wonderings through multiple modes of expression. Through commonplace books, we can understand, imagine, and re-imagine our identities as educational researchers. The world of the imagination and creativity cannot be detached from our daily lives and experiences, as Greene and Miller (1998) note: “[i]magination is what imparts a conscious quality to experience and the realization that things do not repeat themselves, that experience should not be expected to be uniform or frictionless” (p. 5).

We drew on Eisner's (1997) assertion that arts-based research is imbued with a powerful aesthetic that evokes feelings, thoughts and images which other forms of inquiry are unable to convey. We find these methods have the ability not only to enhance our perspectives, but also to raise further questions and highlight ambiguities. This work is reminiscent of the works of storytellers, poets, dramatists, essayists, and artists, evoking the imagination and allowing the reader and writer to find personal meaning in and from the work. The commonplace book is an extension of the written word and fits into the arts-based and arts-informed realm of eliciting creativity to explore a different dimension that goes beyond the written word.

A collective, collaborative work, this article provides different perspectives, in our respective voices, on the artistic process of commonplace book creation whose guiding question was for us to reflect on our journey to becoming researchers. In discussing our methodological approaches and examining our experiences, each sub-section includes a few photographed pages from each author's commonplace book and a reflection on the process written in her respective voice.

Commonplace Book 1: A Social Visual Contract with Scholarly Ideas (Layal Shuman)



Figure 1: Pages from Layal's commonplace book

It was shortly after the US elections in November 2016 when the commonplace book was due in our doctoral colloquium. It was a time when I was angry at the state of the world, angry at the racist and sexist discourse creeping out of news media, poisoning our lives with worries of a dark future. Inside of classrooms, we would engage in conversations about life outside. We would be tolerant with one another when we disagreed, and proud when we found common ground, bouncing off, at any chance, our freshly adopted epistemologies and ontologies as emerging scholars. But outside the walls of university, our ideas would escape our scholarly ideals and transform into nasty parasites burdening the bodies of those in terror. Those burning bodies of children that I kept encountering in news media, followed by discussions of their economic value as refugees in Western societies, they screamed at me: HYPOCRITE. Those images transformed my idealistic ideas into parasites that burden my existence with fear of commodifying their pain for my scholarly gain.

I went to Sontag (2003) for shelter but my thoughts were challenged *regarding the pain of others*. I delved into the work of Fanon (1967), Said (1978, 1981) and Hall (1995, 2007) who all confirmed the vicious human cycle of thirst for domination through social categorization. I went to Haraway (1989) and Butler (1993) to make sense of my own flesh

only to encounter the complexities of gendering identities. Between the politics of the world and the war inside of me, I was torn. Who was I as a researcher?

It was right after the US elections that I concluded that humanity exists on ideas. We live life choosing ideas that support our ideas of life. We go to war against one another because of what we think is a powerful idea of *power*. We build countries on the idea of *home*. We draw maps, we divide people into races. We argue, we fight, we love, we make peace. All in the name of ideas.

The commonplace book was a way for me to draw the map of my academic path. I created it out of the fear that as I start indulging in the privilege of living amongst ideas, with the intention to contribute to ideas about ideas, I will be hardened by scholarly ideas that I think ideal. The book consists of several visuals, each representing a social contract that I made with myself. Figure 1 shows three of these visuals: The first (left) is a reminder to always be rooted and grounded while my ideas flourish into meaningful outcomes. The second (middle) visual is a plea to be fair to the ideas of others as much as I am fair to mine. The third (right) is a hope that my ideas set me free as researcher, so that I am mindful of my social positions as I produce and spread ideas. Other visuals in the book are along the same concept; each portrays a social visual agreement between ideas and myself as a researcher. The visuals are created with water colour painting and collage art.

The artistic process of creating the commonplace book helped me define my philosophy about research, and the ways I understand the role of academic knowledge production in society. When I was confused about the world, I turned to various scholars to make sense of humanity. It was only later that I found my answers in the pages of my commonplace book through the creative act of bringing to life ideas that are ideal.

Commonplace Book 2: Setting the Stage for Research (Abigail Shabtay)



Figure 2: Pages from Abigail's commonplace book

Through photographs, notes, and memos, my commonplace book documents my researcher journey from some of my earliest experiences of research. The use of photographs is very prominent in my book – there are photographs on every page, often grouped together by theme or layered in collages. I chose this method as photographs have been found to be useful both for reflection and elicitation (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In tracing my researcher journey, I examined photographs that I had collected or stored on digital hard drives or those I had shared on social media platforms. I created piles and lists connecting them to larger ideas, thematically organizing those that I found spoke to my identity development as a researcher. For example, the third page pictured was derived from a pile of photographs and other visual pieces (including a newspaper clipping, and television screenshot) relevant to my theme “child and youth work outside academia.” These visual representations of my work with and for children, demonstrate the experiences that contributed to my interest in conducting research with children and youth, an important facet of my researcher identity. I collected and conducted a preliminary reading of old memos and notes from my past work and research. After this, I

gathered those I felt were relevant to the themes and sorted them according to the piles I had made. I then either summarized the groupings of notes in new reflective memos and presented them on pages, or, when they aligned with the images, I used the words as captions and notes to describe the visuals. Using these multiple representational forms brought forth both implicit and explicit ideas. This reflective exercise enabled me to articulate my identity as a researcher and better understand why the type of research I am currently conducting is important to me.

A key theme that emerged from my commonplace book-making process (depicted in the first two pages pictured) was the idea of drama *as* research. Examining my experiences before my entry into academe, much of my life revolved around theatre and performance. As a young person, I was engaged in numerous drama programs and classes, playwriting, playbuilding, and theatrical performance. What I did not formally acknowledge at the time was that engaging in *drama* was also engaging in *research*.

Through drama, individuals engage in self-discovery, examine behaviors, explore motives, and make sense of their world. When taking on a new role, I engaged not only in traditional, library-based research to understand the time period, social cues, and author's intent, but also in autoethnographic research, examining my own position, motives and understandings in order to *live truthfully under imaginary circumstances* (an acting method commonly referred to by actors as the "Meisner technique" after Sanford Meisner 1905-1997). Pelias (2008) notes that much of actor training involves "giving performers the skills to gain access, to allow others to speak through them, and to inhabit worlds other than their own" (p. 189), a process very similar to more traditional forms of qualitative research. Watching theatre, I engaged in textual analysis of the performances, analyzing the dialogue, action, space, rhythm, sound, staging and material elements of the performance, a type of analysis described by Pavis (2003), as well as deciding what I liked and did not like about each performance and how that would impact future theatre projects I was to be involved with. When playbuilding, I engaged in devised theatre, which is essentially a highly participatory drama-based research process in which a group of actors work on scenes based on their personal experiences of a certain issue or theme, and the final piece is a collage of ideas based on the views and voices of each group member (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995; Norris, 2009; Oddey, 2013).

In creating my commonplace book, I came to realize that my early experiences with theatre deeply influenced my researcher identity. While there are obvious connections between these experiences and my current research, as I work with young people and deeply value participatory, drama-based research methods, there are also less obvious connections. Looking back on the research activities I engaged in as a young performer (whether I acknowledged they were *research* activities at the time), it became evident that these experiences were part of my early (and ongoing) training in becoming a creative, analytical, and reflexive researcher. Tracing this journey, I am more aware of who I am as a researcher, but also who I hope to become.

Throughout my Master's in education and in my yoga teacher training, I kept journals, usually as mandated by different instructors. In these journals, I reflected on course content, readings, assignments, and my own reactions, feelings, and thoughts. With a background in English Literature, and a career in teaching other people how to plan and write texts, and certainly now as an academic researcher, I spend a lot of my time and creative energy in writing. I love writing, and I think I'm reasonably good at it. At the same time, I have often quietly envied my friends and colleagues who paint, draw, dance, compose, and even write creatively. How do they do these things, seemingly effortlessly?

Commonplace Book 3: Finding my Researcher Self (Maggie McDonnell)

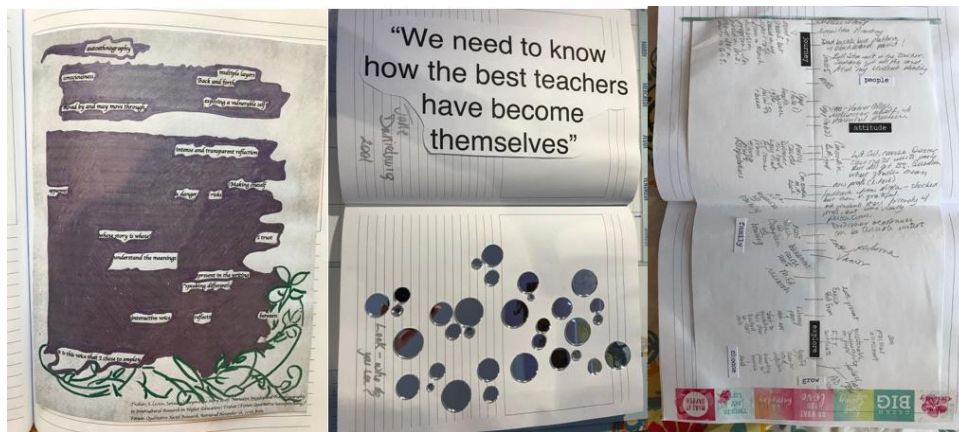


Figure 3: Pages from Maggie's commonplace book

The commonplace book, and the discussion surrounding it, dovetailed nicely with my doctoral research, which explores the relationship between the development of post-secondary teacher identity and assessment practices. Danielewicz (2001) said that “we need to know how the best teachers have become themselves” (p. 3). Rather than focusing on specific practice or philosophy, she suggested that the way teachers see themselves *as* teachers is the key to reflective practice. There is a fundamental difference between saying “I teach” and “I am a teacher.” I become a teacher when I identify as a teacher – and this is true for research, as well. At what point do I say, “I am a researcher?” The commonplace book helped me articulate my researcher-self.

What I found initially challenging about the commonplace book – but ultimately liberating – was finding ways to express and explore my identity as a researcher through different representations. At the heart of all of our commonplace book inquiries is the fundamental question of who we are—as researchers, as academics, as women, as teachers. How I answer the question “who am I?” depends on context, and changes over time, with experience, and even depending on who is asking the question. I’m starting to think of identity as not only multifaceted, but that the number and relationship of the facets is ever-changing. I identify myself not only as a researcher, but as a teacher, a parent, a feminist, a citizen, and so on – and each of these facets inevitably influences and is influenced by the others. Finding a way to explore and articulate my researcher identity has not only influenced how I see myself as a researcher, but in these other facets.

My approach in the commonplace book took on two distinct modes. In the first part of my book, I indulged my generally disused creative, playful side. I used objects symbolically to represent ideas I was exploring. Mirrored pieces came to represent the notion of reflexivity; fuzzy pompoms symbolize the fuzziness (subjective nature) of qualitative research methods; ink stamps helped me represent constant comparison. In the second part of the book, I collected all the reflective memos I had written during the course. I reflected on each one, and on the instructor’s response, and considered how these memos connected to how I had been feeling, and how I felt now.

During the course, I was working on the methodology chapter of my dissertation. Initially, methodology felt like the most elusive aspect of my research. Through the writing of the chapter, though, I started to feel more at home in my methodology, and recorded in one memo that in fact, I was more excited about my methodology than anything else, because rather than feeling tentative and unsure of myself, I was coming to relish the idea that I can construct my own methodology.

In a later memo, I noted how much I value those occasions when I'm forced to ask myself questions that I thought were already answered. The methodology chapter, the reflective memos, and the commonplace book come together, facets themselves, to help me establish for myself who I am as a researcher.

Commonplace Book 4: Reflecting on my Researcher Identity through Story (Nicole Bourassa)

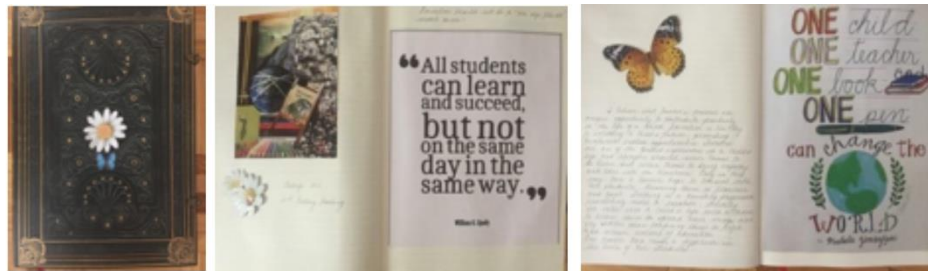


Figure 4: Pages from Nicole's commonplace book

My commonplace book became a means for me to reflect retrospectively on my life and the various relationships and significant moments that shaped me, both personally and professionally as a teacher, and in my journey as a researcher. The process was one where I used artifacts such as photographs (Chalfen, 1998; Wang, 1999), memos and journal entries, collages (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999), to elicit memories. From these memories, I was able to paste together the thoughts and feelings that were associated with these different events and to identify my burgeoning desire to continue my journey as a researcher through the pursuit of my doctorate. I perceived the commonplace book as a compelling way to tell my story through words and pictures, connecting them to the people and places of my life. I believe that storytelling is a powerful means of communicating and that it can be done in a variety of modalities, one of which is the commonplace book. Storytelling engages the listener by weaving a tale with power and poignancy, revealing the author's innermost motivations and intimate feelings, by escorting the audience on a journey that is filled with the sights, sounds of pivotal moments in time. Telling our stories is a reflective and hands-on process that helps us to recognize and understand who we are and what defines us, both as researchers and as human beings.

In thinking about my own story, I travelled back through time to identify the significant moments that led me to this point in my life and the fundamental reasons for having embarked on my journey as teacher and researcher. I did so by examining artifacts that I had collected through the years, particularly those that I have amassed throughout my 39 years of educational practice. I also recollected on various life events from my childhood and adolescence that revealed a propensity toward helping children, teaching others and a love for researching. What I discovered, was that the seeds had been planted very early on in my childhood and that the road that I had chosen was one that would eventually lead me to this place. My commonplace book captures in pictures, words, drawings, collage, notes and other tidbits of information that may appear unremarkable on their own right, but when observed as a whole represent a picture of a life and a story to be told and that continues to unfold over time.

For my doctoral thesis, I have chosen to use narrative, more specifically a memoir, that traces my life story through various chronicles of my life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The commonplace book helped me to reflect and to identify key moments in my journey. It propelled me into a deep introspection, as I grappled with ways in which I could convey my story to others in a meaningful way, enabling others to connect with my story. I recognized that the combination of words and visuals enhances the narrative by revealing ambiguities and

creating an aesthetic dimension (Eisner, 1997). The commonplace book became the impetus for thinking about my work from multiple perspectives and modalities.

Commonplace Book 5: Shaping Research Identity through Cultural Identity Exploration (Fauzanah Fauzan El Muhammady)

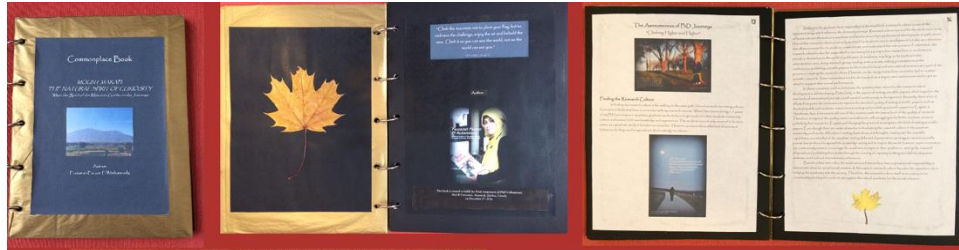


Figure 5: Pages from Fauzanah's commonplace book

Creating a commonplace book was an effective medium for self-exploration and articulating my researcher identity. To me, this book had the power to bridge three important aspects of my life: my cultural identity, academic background, and professional experience. The process of making the commonplace book provided unlimited space for inspirational thinking and connecting my backgrounds with my knowledge development and understanding. This has been particularly helpful in positioning myself as a researcher at the doctoral level. By using narrative and other media, such as photographs, pictures, poetry, paintings, and quotations, making the commonplace book becomes not only a method for self-exploration but also for valorizing freedom of expression. Sumara (2002) suggests that the activity of creating a commonplace book illuminates the processes by which people experience a sense of personal identity and how these experiences are organized by remembered, currently lived, and imagined identifications and relationships. Moreover, the books show how people have developed cultural artifacts and practices that function to help develop and maintain a sense of self.

In creating my commonplace book, using photographs is one of the effective ways to guide me for self-exploration and represent it through narrative stories. A recent study found that photographs have power for reinvigorating the beauty and richness of the personal in the professional, and for creative, multiple and flexible negotiating of personal-professional identities (El Muhammady et al., 2017). In the research process, photographs can be used as an approach for reflection (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In my commonplace book, I used photographs to guide me in exploring my cultural identity, academic background, and professional experience through the reflective stories. To produce reflective stories, such as the story of my cultural identity, I have used the image of a geographical marker of my original culture, Mount *Marapi*, to explore a symbolic representation of my culture, Minangkabau, one of the oldest cultures in Indonesia and to present how the cultural values shaped my researcher identity. Using the photographs helped me symbolize the meanings of the values and norms of my cultural heritage, including those that taught me the principles of curiosity, tolerance, and open-mindedness. These principles also influenced my researcher identity development, experiences, and the pursuit of higher education.

In creating the commonplace book, I found that it also provided spaces to develop various methods in interpretive inquiry contexts such as a textual approach to research, auto-ethnography, and narrative inquiry. For example, through the autoethnographic approach, I used the image of Mount *Marapi* as a starting point from which to explore my personal journey by integrating my educational and professional experiences into narrative stories. Photographs inspired me to make connections between my cultural identity and my researcher identity. The stories that I provided in my commonplace book confirmed that cultural symbolism motivated

and encouraged me to live life as a doctoral student, and to overcome challenges in the acculturation of my social and academic life. It also confirmed that culture has strongly influenced my passion of exploring educational policy contexts.

Creating commonplace book also inspired me to use photographs as a way to explore and provide metaphors for my research interests. For my doctoral research, I am exploring the personal experiences of leaders who had a strong influence in the implementation of institutional transformation policy from both government institution perspectives and higher education institutions. Using photographs in my commonplace book has helped me clarify and find metaphors for the phenomenon studied in my doctoral work as well as with the processes of analyzing my findings (Shank, 2008).

Concluding Thoughts

Writing the article is a new manifestation of our commonplace books, transformed into yet another moment of reflection. We look to this article as an opportunity to extend our artistic processes, inviting readers to join in and reflect on *why* and *how* they engage in academic work. Through artful reflective process and expressions (such as commonplace books) we hope to propose these moments of creativity as valuable performances in the journey of becoming/being qualitative researchers.

When we came together again to write this article, we found ourselves at very different stages of our researcher journeys; some of us crafting research proposals, some conducting fieldwork, others were analyzing data, or drafting chapters of our dissertations. Reflecting and writing together provided an opportunity to reconnect, even as we were each engaged in an exploration of our own unique journeys and processes. At this stage, more than examining the artistic processes that helped us understand what brought us to academe and where we hope to end up, we explore the ways we convey and disseminate these processes through collaborative academic writing. We conclude by asking: How does our relationship with commonplace books shift as the audience for these books becomes a larger academic research community? How do we understand our artistic processes after examining them through collaborative writing? What hidden thoughts and experiences in these processes does reflective writing reveal? What do others read that we think invisible? And, how do our evolving researcher journeys change the ways we view and understand these commonplace books? We invite readers to join us in this ongoing conversation, creating, examining and exploring commonplace books as we collaboratively and individually investigate the potential for this method for reflection, meaning making, and dissemination.

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